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On Certainty in Faith and Science: The Bavinck-Warfield Exchange

Gijsbert van den Brink

Professor Henk van den Belt has done a great favor to Dutch Bavinck enthusiasts by making available, for the first time, both the first (1901) and second (1903) editions of Herman Bavinck's *De zekerheid des geloofs* (*The Certainty of Faith*) in one volume, in such a way that the reader can easily spot the differences between both editions.¹ In addition, van den Belt included two preparatory lectures of Bavinck on the same topic, as well as two reactions to the first edition of *De zekerheid des geloofs* that Bavinck took very seriously.² Van den Belt completed the volume by contextualizing and evaluating these edited Bavinck writings in his own forty-page essay.³ With all these features, Bavinck's famous booklet can now be used not only for personal spiritual edification (as it always could) but also for theological and genealogical analysis.⁴

¹ Herman Bavinck and Henk van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid. Teksten ingeleid en geannoteerd door Henk van den Belt* (*The Certainty of Faith, introduced and annotated by Henk van den Belt*), ed. Henk van den Belt (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2016), 13–98.

² Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 99–215, 217–64.

³ Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 265–306.

⁴ Bavinck's *De zekerheid des geloofs* was translated into English as Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harrie der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia Press, 1980). As far as I can see, this is a translation of the third edition of the Dutch volume, which closely resembles the second one. See also van den

One of the two responses to the first edition of *Zekerheid des geloofs* included in van den Belt's volume is a review by Bavinck's Princetonian colleague, Reformed professor of dogmatics Benjamin B. Warfield. Although we don't know how Warfield learned to read and understand Dutch, he did so with remarkable proficiency and precision.⁵ In translating Warfield's review and including it in this book, Van den Belt, as far as I know, is the first person to make available a publication of Warfield in the Dutch language. In this paper, I will first examine the nature of Warfield's response, focusing in particular on the objections he raises to Bavinck's view of the certainty of the Christian's faith. Next, I will analyze the changes Bavinck incorporated in the second edition of his book that seem to have been prompted by Warfield's criticism. Finally, I will evaluate the exchange between Bavinck and Warfield from a wider perspective: To what extent is there an abiding difference between both theologians on this issue, and how should this difference be interpreted?

Warfield's Review

Warfield's extensive review of Bavinck's *Zekerheid des geloofs* is couched in a polite and friendly style. Warfield writes of a "delightful booklet" in which Bavinck offers "a popular discussion of the whole matter of certitude with reference to Christianity."⁶ He then outlines

Belt's contribution "Herman Bavinck's Lectures on the Certainty of Faith (1891)" to this current volume of *The Bavinck Review*.

⁵ This is demonstrated in that he not only reviewed books by Bavinck and other Dutch theologians but also translated and summarized some portions of *The Certainty of Faith* for the readers of this particular review. In personal communication, neither James D. Bratt nor George Harinck (two of our greatest specialists in Dutch-American neo-Calvinist ties) could tell how and when exactly Warfield had learned Dutch; presumably, he was an autodidact.

⁶ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Review of *De zekerheid des geloofs*, by H. Bavinck," *The Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 138–48. The review is reprinted in Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. J. E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970–73), 2:106–23. Since the original publication

the thrust of Bavinck's argument, praising Bavinck's survey of the history of thought on the certainty of faith in the church as "illuminating," and seconding his criticism of pietistic and evangelistic streams in Christianity for their undervaluing the earthly sphere (e.g., art and science, literature and politics, the economy—in one word, culture).⁷ Warfield fully shares the "wide-minded conception of the mission of Christianity in the world" that radiates from Bavinck's exposition. He adds to that, however—and here is a first instance of mild criticism—that this conception can be adequately grounded only in an organic view of redemption. By "organic" Warfield means something like "encompassing" or "all-embracing" here: "For it is only as we realize that God is saving the world and not merely one individual here and there out of the world, that the profound significance of the earthly life to the Christian can be properly apprehended" (140).⁸ By missing this point, the uninformed reader "may fail to catch the ground" of the earthly life's profound significance to the Christian. So here is a first point of difference between Warfield and Bavinck, even though it may be due only to Bavinck's oversight. At any rate, we will call this "Criticism #1."

Warfield then sketches how Bavinck, in determining how certainty of faith is attained, navigates his way through the most popular answers to this question—namely, the apologetic one and the experiential one. According to Bavinck, we can reach certitude neither by a process of reasoning and demonstrating the truth of the Christian faith, for in that case our certainty will never be absolute, nor by falling back on our individual experiences, for heartfelt experiences are

will be more readily available to most readers through the internet, I will quote from the *Princeton Theological Review* edition. In this section, page numbers in parentheses in the body of the text refer to this source.

⁷ Warfield, "Review," 140.

⁸ Warfield, "Review," 140; Warfield contrasts this organic view with the "individualistic and atomistic" perspective of "the Pietist, Moravian, and Methodist." Warfield, "Review," 140.

wrought by the teachings of every religion. Instead, certainty is the fruit of faith itself—faith being the personal act by means of which the believer’s whole being is directed “in loving trust” to the object presented to it.⁹ Thus, “certainty flows to us immediately and directly out of faith itself” (142). The best way for people to receive certainty and to grow in strength of faith is therefore to focus the eyes of their heart not on their faith, as such, but on its object, the promises of God as conveyed in the gospel: “It is this object that works through faith on our nature and produces certainty” (142). In this way Warfield provides a sharp summary of Bavinck’s main point and then states that he agrees with it.

Yet Warfield has a problem with Bavinck’s exposition. In pointing out the nature of this problem, Warfield politely suggests the possibility that the problem may reflect his own limited capacity for comprehension. From the way in which he develops his point, however, it is clear that Warfield attributes the source of his confusion to Bavinck. In contrast to Bavinck, Warfield argues that we should distinguish between “certainty of the truth of the Christian religion,” on the one hand, and “assurance of faith” as one’s own participation in the benefits of Christ’s salvific work, on the other hand. Bavinck conflates these two, suggesting that in both cases certitude is attained by and large in the same way and even through the same act of faith. In Warfield’s wording of Bavinck’s view: “It is only by the direct act of faith, laying hold of Christ as redeemer” that we acquire both certainty about the truth of Christianity and assurance of our personal salvation. In response, Warfield first makes a purely conceptual point: “It will conduce to clearness if we endeavor to keep separate the two” (142). Let us call this conceptual point “Criticism # 2.” It turns out, however, that there is a material issue lurking behind this formal distinction. To be sure, Warfield feels no need to contradict

⁹ Warfield, “Review,” 141.

Bavinck directly on this issue. Bavinck's position, though, "seems to involve certain assumptions that stand in some need of explication"—which is, of course, a wonderfully charming way to express one's reservations.

Warfield then focuses in particular on one of these assumptions, devoting only a few words at the end of his review to a second one: Bavinck's assumption "of the invariable or normal implication of 'assurance of salvation' in the direct act of faith," which seemed to leave no room for the possibility of a person being a sincere believer but lacking certainty about the salvific character of his or her faith.¹⁰ Since this criticism comes at the end of Bavinck's review, let us call it "Criticism # 5." But Bavinck's main assumption, which "stand[s] in some need of explication" (i.e., which Warfield presumably considered to be wrong), concerns something else—namely, the relationship between belief in the truth of the Christian gospel, on the one hand, and belief in one's personal salvation, on the other hand. First, Bavinck seems to "reverse the natural order" here by stipulating that "saving faith underlies and is the prerequisite of certitude of the truth of the Christian religion" (142). How did Warfield come to ascribe this position to Bavinck? Here is the critical passage that Warfield quotes in support and that indeed confirms his conclusion:

When we from the heart believe the promises of God revealed in the gospel, say, for example, the forgiveness of sins, we believe at the same time that we are ourselves personally by grace sharers in the blessing of forgiveness; the former is impossible without the latter. Certitude as to

¹⁰ Warfield, "Review," 148. In response, Warfield points to the classical distinction between the *actus directus* and the *actus reflectus* of faith, suggesting that salvation may in some sense be connected to the former but certitude to the latter. Interestingly, as van den Belt shows (*Geloofszekeerheid*, 228), in the Dutch context the same criticism was prompted by the first edition of Bavinck's booklet and led Bavinck to incorporate some further changes (apart from those elicited by Warfield's main point) in the second edition. In what follows, I will pass over this second issue and concentrate on the first one, which Warfield discusses much more extensively.

the truth of the gospel is never to be attained except along the path of personal, saving faith.¹¹

In contrast to this view, Warfield suggests that our conviction of the truth of the Christian religion *logically precedes* our self-commitment to Christ as redeemer. And though there may be “a point in which the two do coalesce” (142), the reasons or grounds we have for the first conviction do not necessarily coincide with those we have for the second one, that is, the belief that we are personally “in Christ.” Let us call this Warfield’s “Criticism # 3.”

Following this, Warfield tightly connects certitude about the truth of the Christian religion to the availability of *evidences* for this truth. Here, another critique of Bavinck emerges— “Criticism # 4”: Warfield is much more positive than Bavinck about the role and significance of apologetics as the discipline that provides and analyzes such evidences. Indeed, “it is . . . characteristic of the school of thought of which Dr. Bavinck is a shining ornament to estimate the value of Apologetics somewhat lightly” (143). According to Bavinck, we cannot reach certitude of faith by appealing to rational proofs or historical evidences, “proving first of all on rational grounds that God exists . . . and then that the apostles are trustworthy witnesses of the truth . . . that Jesus really lived and worked and taught as He is represented to have done; and the like” (141). Here Warfield disagrees, having a much higher opinion of the role and significance of the “evidences.”¹² This is not to say that in Warfield’s view “entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven can be had only through the lofty gateway of Science” (143). A person definitely need not be a learned apologist in order to become a Christian; for clearly, there are other evidences

¹¹ Warfield, “Review,” 141. These words are presumably Warfield’s translation of a passage that occurs only in the first edition of *Certainty of Faith*. See van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 90.

¹² Indeed, Warfield clearly prefers the word “evidence(s)” to “proof(s).”

than philosophical and historical ones—evidences we may not be capable of analyzing but that can still ground our faith. Warfield uses some examples from common sense and universal human experience to illustrate his point: there is no need for us to study astronomy in order to know for sure, and on reasonable grounds, that the sun exists. Nor do we need to be able to analyze the grounds for concluding that a certain handwriting sample belongs to our good friend in order to believe so for good reasons. Similarly, “we believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in Him, not though it be irrational” (143). If asked, we can give grounds for our believing in Christ. More in general, Warfield holds that every act of faith we can think of is grounded in evidence (142).

Warfield acknowledges that Bavinck does not discard the role of evidences and apologetics altogether. Still, in his eyes Bavinck unduly downplays their significance. The evidences are definitely important to Bavinck “to stop the mouth of opponents and to repel their assaults” (143). The believer does not need them, however, since it is not through the evidences that he comes to faith. Something else is needed here: the work of the Holy Spirit. In brief, apologetics “is the fruit, not the root of faith,” and the evidences or proofs are insufficient “to place the truth of Christianity beyond doubt” (143). Warfield readily agrees that the evidences cannot produce faith, but in his view Bavinck is proposing a false dilemma here: that the evidences cannot produce faith is hardly remarkable, since even the proclamation of the gospel cannot do so. The point is that the Holy Spirit *makes use of* both means to convince those whose hearts are prepared for the truth of the gospel. Thus, the Spirit does not work in the heart of believers a blind or unreasonable faith, nor new grounds not known before; rather, the Spirit works “a new power in the heart to respond to the grounds of faith, sufficient in themselves, already present to the mind” (143). In line with Reformed scholastic theologians, Warfield distinguishes between the reason, or argument, because of which I

believe (*argumentum propter quod credo*) and the principle, or efficient cause, through which I am induced to believe (*principium seu causa efficiens a qua ad credendum adducor*).¹³ He even suggests that we can have the former without the latter, in which case we possess a so-called “historical faith,” which is not (or not yet) complemented by a personal act of salvific faith as worked by the Spirit. Even in that case, this historical faith is not entirely useless. As Bavinck himself had acknowledged, it bears important fruits in the realm of common grace.

Thus, Warfield distinguishes between certainty about the objective truth of the gospel that is based on evidences, and certainty of one’s personal faith and participation in Christ, which, while based on the same grounds, can be worked only by the Holy Spirit. Since the fall into sin, humans still naturally and intuitively believe in God—like even the devils do (James 2:19)—and we know that we are dependent on Him; but we can no longer have faith in God in the deeper sense of trusting Him. In other words, whereas we continue to believe in God in the intellectual sense, we can no longer exercise faith in God in the fiducial sense (144). Both the intellectual and fiducial forms of belief, however, rest on proper grounds. And here Warfield once again utters his astonishment that not only Bavinck but also Kuyper made so little of apologetics as the discipline in which these grounds are put forward and elucidated: “It is a standing matter of surprise to us that the school which Bavinck so brilliantly represents, should be tempted to make so little of Apologetics” (144). For clearly, apologetics can contribute to “the Christianizing of the world” (146). The part that it has to play is not subsidiary and just

¹³ Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofs zekerheid*, 238, note 40, points out that this distinction can indeed be found in Reformed scholasticism, e.g., in Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–97), 1:87.

defensive, but primary and conquering. For the individual “does require that sort and amount of evidence which is requisite to convince him before he can really be convinced” (146). And this sort and amount of evidence is provided by the discipline of apologetics.

After a somewhat longer digression into Kuyper’s work (see “Evaluation” below), Warfield finally returns to Bavinck in order to again express his gratitude for Bavinck’s booklet. He does not want to give the impression of “arraying ourselves polemically against his teaching” (148). It is just the “inherent interest and comparative novelty of the subject” that brought him to such extended remarks (148). More in general, Bavinck has given us the most valuable treatise on dogmatics written during the last quarter of a century—a thoroughly wrought-out treatise which we never consult without the keenest and abundant profit. And the lectures and brochures he from time to time presents an eager public are worthy of the best traditions of Reformed thought and Reformed eloquence. Not least among them we esteem this excellent booklet on “the certitude of faith” (148).

Bavinck’s Response

How did Bavinck respond to Warfield’s criticisms? Warfield himself had surmised at the end of his review that Bavinck might “give a hearty assent to all—or most—of what we have urged.”¹⁴ The only way to find out whether this is true is to compare the first and second editions of *The Certainty of Faith*. In a short new preface dated November 1903, Bavinck points out that in the second edition various thoughts have been elaborated and explained more clearly in order to answer the questions and comments of some readers. “In particular has been taken notice of the friendly and instructive assessment

¹⁴ Warfield, “Review,” 148. As far as I can see, Warfield is sincere here and not patronizing (as if Bavinck just hadn’t thought through the issues far enough and would readily agree with him once he had done so).

which prof. Warfield from Princeton has given of my treatise.”¹⁵ Due to van den Belt’s editorial work, we can now easily spot the changes that Bavinck has made in the second edition of his treatise, and by comparing these to Warfield’s review, we are able to determine with some probability Warfield’s influence on Bavinck on the topics at hand.¹⁶

There are no fewer than sixteen places where Bavinck has added one or more sentences to the text of his first edition and changed or omitted lines from it. Two of these are to be found in part 1, an introductory chapter titled “What Is Certainty in Science and Religion?” In part 2, “The Search for Certainty Outside and Within Christianity,” no changes have been made. Thus, all remaining changes (fourteen total) are located in part 3, “The Way to Certainty According to Holy Scripture.”¹⁷ If we number these changes, it seems to me that no connection with Warfield’s review can be found in changes 2 (one explicating sentence), 6, 9 (a purely formal point), 10, 11, 12, and 15. Change 14 is a revision and further explication of Bavinck’s second assumption as distinguished and questioned by Warfield. Here Bavinck constructively picks up Warfield’s “Criticism # 5” by nuancing his position. While Warfield had only mentioned this issue in passing at the end of his review, in the Netherlands it had sparked more debate. Bavinck had already elaborated on it in a short article

¹⁵ Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 20, my translation (the preface is not included in Der Nederlanden’s translation; cf. note 4, above).

¹⁶ We will never know for sure, though. Bavinck intentionally uses the plural in his preface (speaking of “some” whose questions and remarks he had taken into account when preparing the second edition), and it is possible that some of Warfield’s comments coincided with those of others, as was the case with regard to Criticism 5.

¹⁷ The third edition, which was the basis of the English translation, has four parts instead of three, since the first pages of the booklet have been given a heading as well (“1 The Loss of Certainty”). Parts 1, 2, and 3, as mentioned above, correspond to parts 2, 3, and 4 in the English translation. Page numbers between parentheses in this section refer to this translation.

written in response to a question by someone who had read the first edition of *The Certainty of Faith*, and by means of change 14 he incorporates the tenor of this article in his second edition.¹⁸ So for our purposes we are left with changes 1, 3–5, 7, 8, 13, and 16. To sum up: exactly 50 percent of the changes—eight of sixteen—seem to have been inspired (as far as we can see) by Warfield’s review. Let us have a closer look at each of these changes in turn.

Change 1 is a quite lengthy addition, comprising pages 25–28 in the English translation. Whereas in the preceding passage Bavinck had strongly differentiated between scientific certainty and the certitude of faith, “which does not depend on fallible human insight but on unshakeable divine authority” (25), in these additional paragraphs he emphasizes the similarities between both, pointing out that “a large part of our knowledge rests upon the testimony of others and can, therefore, only be obtained by way of faith” (25). Therefore, since testimony and trust play a role in all sciences, the problem with theology is not that it refers to a divine testimony that “deserves our faith and trust.” The problem, rather, is that humankind is “endlessly divided” as to “where this divine authority is to be found and how it can be recognized” (27). This problem of religious pluralism should instill in us a deep sense of humility because of our apparent blindness in religious matters, but it should not keep us from sincerely seeking the truth. It is at this point that Bavinck admits that the question of the certitude of faith is twofold: “It can be addressed to the truth of the religion we ought to follow, or to our personal share in the salvation promised by this religion” (28). Though these two questions are closely connected to each other, they should nevertheless not be confused but distinguished: “The act of faith by which I recognize the truth differs from the one by which I am assured of my own

¹⁸ See van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 249–64. Apparently the question of this “kind reader” (257) was posed in private correspondence with Bavinck; we have only Bavinck’s rendering of it (257–58).

salvation” (28). Here, it seems to me, Bavinck fully concedes that Warfield was right when bringing up his second point of criticism distinguished above: the conceptual point that the *fides quae* and *fides qua* should be distinguished from each other, since the certainty question looks different in both cases.

Similarly, in change 16—a new paragraph inserted just before the final sentences of his book—Bavinck adopts the point Warfield had made in “Criticism # 1.” Quoting some biblical texts that highlight the universal scope of salvation as brought about by Christ (John 3:16–17; Col. 1:18–20), Bavinck embeds the significance of earthly life and culture in the wider panorama of God’s saving purposes for the entire world: “The history of all things proceeds . . . toward the redemption of the church as the new humanity, toward the liberation of the world in an organic sense, toward a new heaven and a new earth” (96). Note that Bavinck even literally adopts Warfield’s term “organic” here. So it seems Bavinck has granted and incorporated both Warfield’s first and second criticisms, as well as the fifth and final one, which coincided with the issue raised by a Dutch reader. How about the remaining points of critique—that is, the order in which certainty of the gospel and certainty about one’s personal share in its promises are acquired (“Criticism # 3”) and the role of evidences with regard to the Christian faith (“Criticism # 4”)? Clearly these two points are inextricably linked with to each other: if indeed certainty about the truth of the gospel precedes certainty about one’s personal salvation, evidences presumably play a much more important role than when all depends on one’s personal act of faith commitment.

Let us start with the role of the evidences, since most of the remaining textual changes brought about by Bavinck pertain to this issue. First, both in change 3 and in change 8 Bavinck slightly alters the wording of one sentence in such a way as to make clear that although the evidences or proofs may not be insufficient to support the

truth of the gospel—something he had claimed in the first edition—they are insufficient to move someone to accept this truth. Although Bavinck does not say why this is so, we can infer from the context that this is caused by what is today called the noetic effects of sin: humanity’s sinful blindness and unwillingness to accept God’s revelation for what it is. In any case, Bavinck implicitly grants Warfield’s point that the grounds of faith, as they present themselves to the mind, are “sufficient in themselves,”¹⁹ the only problem being that we humans are reluctant to accept them—until the Holy Spirit gives us the power of the heart and the faith to do so. Thus, according to Warfield, the faith that God gives—both in the sense of a conviction of the truth of the gospel and in the sense of certainty about one’s personal salvation—is grounded in the evidences, and by subtly changing a couple of sentences Bavinck admits that, after all, Warfield may be right here.²⁰ Similarly, in change 7—a rewriting of a couple of sentences—Bavinck leaves out his earlier claim at this place that the truth of the Christian religion cannot be demonstrated in advance to the so-called unbiased scholar.²¹ Thus, he grants that, objectively speaking, the truth of the gospel and of the Christian faith *can* be established by the evidences that speak in favor of them.²²

¹⁹ Warfield, “Review,” 143.

²⁰ On p. 59 of *Certainty of Faith*, Bavinck changes the phrase “Although the proofs are insufficient to disclose the truth of Christianity” into “Although the proofs may be insufficient to move someone to believe in the truth of Christianity” (change 3). And on p. 74 he changes the sentence “If the gospel could be established beforehand by scientific arguments, it would not gain but lose force” into “If man could be compelled to accept God’s Word through scientific reasoning, the gospel would not gain but lose force” (change 8).

²¹ Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofs zekerheid*, 80 (“Zijn waarheid kan niet van tevoren aan de zogenaamde onbevooroordeelde onderzoeker aangetoond worden”).

²² Van den Belt points out that in later editions of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck indeed inserted some more positive remarks on the role of evidences and apologetics in this regard. Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofs zekerheid*, 223.

Bavinck further explains his position on the role of evidences in change 4, which is a somewhat lengthier addition shortly after change 3, and which, presumably, elucidates the reason behind change 3 (as well as changes 7 and 8). Bavinck does two things here in two separate paragraphs. First, he specifies the particular role of proofs and evidences vis-à-vis the testimony of Holy Scripture. Bavinck maintains his view that this role is *not* to provide a scientific underpinning to the Christian faith, but to defend it against its opponents. As such, however, Bavinck thinks very highly of the scientific arguments that have been put forward in favor of the Bible's genuineness and reliability. They are even successful to such an extent that if the Scriptures contained general or universal history rather than a religious appeal, the proofs "would generally be regarded as sufficient" (60). Second, however, Bavinck argues that "because of the subjective inclination of the human heart" (i.e., our sinful unwillingness to obey God), the proofs are unable to turn humans into believers. Bavinck admits that even "the word of the Gospel" lacks the power to do this, thus acknowledging a perceptive point that Warfield had made. He goes on, however, to belittle the significance of proofs for believers by pointing out that "they are usually of a more or less scientific nature and . . . usually known and understood only by the higher educated." Biblical revelation, by contrast, is not only for the learned but also for "the common man" (60). That is why from a religious point of view, as opposed to the scientific point of view, proofs are of little value, since nobody's religious life is based on or nurtured by them.

From a rhetorical point of view, this may have been a masterful twist of Bavinck, since there is no doubt that Bavinck's readers (most of whom belonged to the so-called *kleine luyden*, i.e., largely uneducated people) would have readily agreed with him. As a response to Warfield, however, Bavinck's added words missed the point, since Warfield had made it crystal clear that he was *not* speaking about

scientific proofs only. As we saw above, he had made his case by offering some examples from common sense; for example, there is no need for us to study astronomy in order to know for sure, and on reasonable grounds, that the sun exists. Evidences for belief in God may be of the same nature: though most of us will be unable to fully analyze them, they can still function as proper grounds for faith. So Bavinck wins an easy victory here by simply ignoring the full scope of Warfield's point. The only nuance he inserts in his discourse in response to Warfield is that he now, once again, no longer blames the inefficacy of proofs on their inadequacy, but on our human stubbornness. For their practical value, however, this makes no difference: they do not serve as preliminary stepping-stones toward the faith but only as sound defenses against its opponents. Or in Bavinck's earlier words, which he retained in the second edition, the believer "must seek grounds, not for his own faith, but to make it more acceptable to the outsider, to silence criticism" (22).

Bavinck's two remaining alterations to the text of the first edition of *Certainty of Faith*, changes 5 and 13, pertain to Warfield's third criticism as distinguished in the section "Warfield's Review" above. Recall that Warfield had insisted here that our conviction of the truth of the Christian religion *logically precedes* our commitment to Christ as redeemer rather than, as Bavinck had it, following it. We have seen already that Bavinck omitted from his text the crudest words in which he had expressed his views. The sentences asserting that belief in the truth of the gospel is impossible without the belief that one personally shares in the blessing of forgiveness, and that "certitude as to the truth of the gospel is never to be attained except along the path of personal, saving faith" did not make it into the second edition.²³ Instead, Bavinck now grants that the certainty inherent in the faith "first of all" accepts the objective truth of the promises given in

²³ See note 11 above. The striking of these sentences in the second edition was part of change 14.

the gospel “but also” includes certitude “that by grace we too share in these promises” (85).²⁴ So he seems to be conceding Warfield’s point on the right order of objective and subjective certainty.

This is not to say, however, that Bavinck ceded all of Warfield’s points. For, as Bavinck now more emphatically highlights by means of changes 5 and 13, he is opposed to splitting up the realm of faith in a historical part (which can be established by arguments and evidences) and a salvific part (which is brought about by supernatural grace). Bavinck attributes this view to the Roman Catholic Church, but along with that he may very well have had Warfield in mind.²⁵ For, as we saw, Warfield had made a similar distinction between a historical faith that could be supported by proofs and an additional act of personal faith as worked by the Holy Spirit.²⁶

In contrast with this two-tier model of faith, in Bavinck’s fifth change he insists that the Reformation considered God’s revelation in the Bible not first of all as a narrative about historical events to be believed, but as a word of God toward us (63): “Therefore, faith wasn’t just assent to the truth of historical reports but a heartfelt trust in the good news of salvation” (63–64). In change 13 Bavinck makes even clearer what he has in mind by explicitly rejecting any sequential order that could be construed here:

From its very inception and as the Reformation returning to Scripture again clarified it, faith has a religious character. It is not first a historical knowledge which later is supplemented and completed by trust or love. From the very beginning it is a religious state, a practical knowing, a

²⁴ The original Dutch is even more pronounced here, ordering both forms of certainty along clear temporal lines through the use of “allereerst” (first of all) and “vervolgens” (next, subsequently). Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 89.

²⁵ Van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 71 (change 5).

²⁶ The distinction is similar, not identical; Warfield held that the historical faith should be complemented by an act of personal faith, not by acts of love as in the Roman Catholic confession (cf. the notion of *fides caritate formata*). In both cases, however, historical faith is preparatory to “the real thing.”

knowledge that applies to myself, an appropriation of the promises God made to me. (82)

So whoever accepts Scripture's testimony "confirms that God is truthful" (83)—and thus personally puts his or her trust in God. Here Bavinck makes it quite clear that, in the end, he refuses to go in the material direction that Warfield had pointed out by distinguishing between two sorts of faith. Instead, he maintains that in essence there is only one act of faith, by means of which we obtain certitude both of the objective truth of God's promises and of our subjective, personal share in these.

Evaluation

In the preceding section we saw that Bavinck, despite yielding to Warfield on a couple of secondary issues, stood his ground with regard to Warfield's main criticisms of his booklet; he did not give in to Warfield's desire to ascribe a more prominent role to philosophical, historical, or commonsensical evidences for the Christian faith, and neither did he adopt Warfield's two-tier view of faith as consisting of a historical part complemented by a salvific one. We may safely assume that these differences between both Reformed theologians were real and sincere; after having read Warfield's review, Bavinck must have seriously considered to what extent he could and should adopt the critical points Warfield had advanced. On the one hand, both Bavinck and Warfield downplayed the significance of their disagreements, being well aware that such differences of opinion did not at all threaten the bond of Christian fellowship between them; in that sense, their exchange is a fine example of how Reformed Christians can disagree with each other on theological matters while they at the same time realize that their differences fall within the scope of Christian freedom. On the other hand, however, both were presumably aware that their differences of opinion were not entirely insignificant

since they touched the very heart of what the Christian faith is all about.

How can we explain that despite their friendly relationship and their strong spiritual and theological like-mindedness, Bavinck and Warfield consistently deviated on these issues? How should we frame their exchange—from what historical, theological, or philosophical perspective can it most helpfully be interpreted? In the secondary literature various options have been suggested here. One of these connects the theological differences between Bavinck and Warfield to the debate about post-Reformation Reformed scholasticism as compared to the theology of the Reformers.²⁷ When viewed in this light, it could be assumed that Bavinck belongs to what came to be called the “old school,” whereas Warfield somehow preceded the “new school.” That is, Bavinck was critical of what he saw as subtle theological changes occurring in the transition from Calvin and other Reformers toward post-Reformation Reformed orthodox theology. In this process, the concept of faith came to be seen as “an assemblage, which like a machine is put together from different parts”;²⁸ and evidences became more and more important as rational underpinnings of the Christian scheme. Warfield, however, was not convinced that Reformed orthodox theologians had deviated in such

²⁷ For an interpretation along such lines, see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 389; critical of this line of interpretation is Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God’s Word in Servant Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic, 2008). Cf. Henk van den Belt, “Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the *Autopistia* of Scripture,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 32–45, who rightly mitigates the differences between Bavinck and Warfield on this score without denying them (45). See also van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 179–300.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 85 (change 14).

lamentable ways from the Reformers; he would probably have subscribed to the “continuity thesis,” as forcefully advanced and elaborated today by Richard Muller and his school.²⁹ Indeed, it is interesting to see how at critical junctures Warfield appeals to “our Reformed fathers,” meaning by this (as van den Belt helpfully annotates) Reformed orthodox theologians such as Francis Turretin, whereas Bavinck rather invokes “the Reformation,” no doubt having in mind the theology of Reformers like Luther and Calvin.³⁰ Despite such differences, commentators are divided on the issue of whether the views of Bavinck and Warfield on faith, reason, and Scripture can indeed be adequately interpreted along such lines.³¹

Alternatively, we can interpret the Bavinck-Warfield exchange in philosophical rather than historico-theological categories. One way to do so would be to suggest that whereas Warfield operated along the lines of classical foundationalism, Bavinck, inspired as he was by John Calvin, broke away from this scheme and became a predecessor of Reformed epistemology.³² That is, Warfield portrayed the Christian faith as a house built on a foundation of infallible proofs and indubitable evidences, whereas Bavinck denied that faith was in need of proofs and evidences at all. In his view, Christians may be perfectly

²⁹ Cf., e.g., Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

³⁰ Warfield, “Review,” 143; cf. van den Belt, ed., *Geloofszekerheid*, 237–38. Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 63–64; Bavinck can also refer to “our fathers” (85, meaning here certain Reformed scholastic theologians), but then in order to qualify their point.

³¹ See note 27.

³² For a defense of the latter point of view, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Herman Bavinck—Proto Reformed Epistemologist,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 133–46; for a similar discussion with regard to Kuyper, cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, “Was Kuyper a Reformed Epistemologist?,” in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of His Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), 158–65.

entitled to their Christian beliefs even though they cannot demonstrate their truth because they are “properly basic” to them; their beliefs come to them spontaneously and immediately, but nevertheless they are epistemically justified, or warranted.³³ As we have seen above, there is a kernel of truth in such a categorization. Nicholas Wolterstorff has rightly pointed out, however, that it would be anachronistic to uncritically apply such technical categories from late-twentieth-century philosophical debates to the much earlier and much less philosophically robust work of Bavinck (and, by extension, Warfield).³⁴ Moreover, it is not clear that Warfield could be called a classical foundationalist. The examples he gave of what may count as convincing evidence (e.g., for knowing that the sun exists) were not of a scientific nature, but suggested that we may have sound reasons for believing in God that come to us spontaneously instead of having been logically inferred from indubitable foundations.

Therefore, without altogether denying that applying these later frameworks to the Bavinck-Warfield exchange may make some sense, I would like to suggest a more contemporaneous intellectual framework that might help us interpret and contextualize the differences between Bavinck and Warfield. When wondering about Bavinck’s low opinion of apologetics, Warfield proposes that this might be explained by the influence of Abraham Kuyper’s anti-theoretical thinking in terms of “two kinds of science”: that of natural man under the power of sin and that of born-again man under the

³³ On the notions of classical foundationalism, Reformed epistemology, and properly basic belief, see, e.g., Alvin Plantinga’s seminal essay “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93. On warrant, see especially Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁴ Wolterstorff, “Bavinck—Proto Reformed Epistemologist,” 145–46; the reason why Wolterstorff nevertheless labels Bavinck a “proto Reformed epistemologist” is that “basic themes of Reformed epistemology were already present in Bavinck a hundred years ago” (146).

power of *palingenesis* (regeneration, rebirth). Indeed, in his Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Kuyper had argued that “not faith and science . . . but *two scientific systems* or if you choose, two scientific elaborations, are opposed to each other, *each having its own faith*.”³⁵ Thus, according to Kuyper (and Bavinck followed him on this), there is little common ground between Christians and others when carrying out scientific research. Both are working on the erection of separate buildings, Kuyper says elsewhere.³⁶ In such a climate, it does not make much sense to refer to evidences for the Christian faith since they won’t be convincing to those who don’t take its principles as their point of departure.

In contrast to this view, Warfield holds that there *is* a relevant amount of common ground between Christian believers and “other sinful men” (145). Given the noetic effects of sin, the science of sinful people will, by definition, be imperfect, since at all points of the process there are “deflecting influences.” That is why doing science is often toilsome and comes with many mistakes. What, then, happens when we become regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit? Here Warfield is much more modest than Kuyper:

Regeneration . . . is not in the first instance the removal of sin; the regenerated man remains a sinner . . . No new faculties have been inserted into him by regeneration; and the old faculties common to man in all his states have been only measurably restored to their proper functioning. He is in no position therefore to produce a science different in *kind* from that produced by sinful man: the science of *palingenesis* is only a part of the science of sinful humanity, though no doubt its best part. (145)

³⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 133 (italics original); cf. 132: “This, and no other, is the principal antithesis, which separates the thinking minds in the domain of Science into two opposite battle-arrays.”

³⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (New York: Scribner’s, 1898), 155.

What we see here is a very different view on the nature of science vis-à-vis the Christian faith—one which allows for much more common ground between Christians and others. In science, we *all* have to struggle with our limitations, so that we can attain our goal “only in part and by slow accretions and through many partial and erroneous constructions.” But humans “work side by side” at this common task (145).³⁷

Behind Warfield’s considerations we may surmise the influence of Thomas Reid and other Scottish common sense philosophers. There was a strong Scottish influence at Princeton both in Warfield’s days and before (for example, one of Warfield’s most admired professors at Princeton, the philosopher James McCosh, had immigrated from Scotland and went back and forth several times). Whereas Continental theologians—including Kuyper and especially Bavinck³⁸—had been deeply influenced by the Kantian idea that when it comes to belief in God, arguments and evidences don’t work since from our human perspective we can’t gain any knowledge of God, their Anglo-Saxon counterparts were far less exacting here. And rightly so, it seems to me. As Nicholas Wolterstorff—who is as much of a Reidian as of a Kuyperian philosopher—has shown, it is both desirable and possible that theologians should “recover from Kant.”³⁹

³⁷ My account here differs from the “Kuyperian” reading of such passages in Warfield offered by Paul Kjoss Helseth, e.g., in his “A Rather ‘Bald Rationalist’? The Appeal to Right Reason,” in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 54–75 (esp. 73–74). Acknowledging common ground between Christians and others does not necessarily turn one into a “bald rationalist.”

³⁸ It is remarkable that Bavinck did not respond to Warfield’s analysis of the background of their differences—neither in the second edition of *Certainty of Faith* nor, as far as I know, elsewhere.

³⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 35–55.

And perhaps Reid offers the best antidote here.⁴⁰ In any case, we can now see how Reid's emphasis on the epistemic value of testimony, historical evidence, and common sense returns in the apologetics of Warfield.⁴¹ It is my estimation that we should not blame Warfield for this, as has been done from time to time. Warfield was not an Enlightenment rationalist who had an almost "Pelagian confidence"⁴² in the epistemic capacities of unregenerate human beings. Rather, he had a sober and humble Calvinistic view of the epistemic powers of *regenerate* Christians, acknowledging that the noetic effects of sin had by no means entirely disappeared from their minds. He differed from Kuyper and Bavinck in rejecting the idea that one's basic principles or presuppositions were all-decisive. Instead, he was convinced that Christians could well support their position by using the same sort of reasons and arguments as their opponents. It testifies of his intellectual stature that, conversely, he was able to adopt "unwelcome" scientific conclusions drawn by secular scientists when he found their arguments convincing, as was the case during parts of his life with regard to Darwinian evolution.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ The extent to which Warfield stood in the tradition and under the influence of Scottish common sense realism is debated, but that he did so, especially in his apologetic methodology, is beyond doubt. Cf., e.g., George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 110–16. Fred Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 30, 64, 550, unhelpfully downplays Warfield's indebtedness to this philosophical school because this connection has often been used to criticize Warfield as succumbing to rationalist assumptions of Enlightenment philosophy. More instructive is Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lion of Princeton: B. B. Warfield as Apologist and Theologian* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), chapter 2.

⁴² Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 290.

⁴³ Cf., e.g., Gijsbert van den Brink, *En de aarde bracht voort. Christelijk geloof en evolutie* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 2017), 96–98; David N. Livingstone, *Dealing with Darwin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 185–191.

It can be argued that this Reidian view of Warfield and his contemporaries has had a positive influence on the vitality of American Christianity, perhaps more so than Kuyperian (and Van Tillian) presuppositionalism, which isolated the Christian community from the wider intellectual debate. The appeal to common sense and to generally available evidences for the Christian faith fostered a climate in which discussion between believers, atheists, and seekers became possible and sensible. In that climate, Christianity continued to make its claim to rationality and reasonability, from Warfield all the way down to Plantinga, thus not losing its intellectual credibility as much as on the European continent. It is therefore comprehensible that scholars have considered this heritage of Scottish common sense philosophy as a partial explanation of how, during the twentieth century, the United States could withstand the forces of secularization more effectively than most Western European countries.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See, e.g., James L. Guth et al., "Onward Christian Soldiers? Religion and the Bush Doctrine," *Books and Culture*, July/August 2005, 20–21.